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Transhumanism, Human Enhancement and Ethical Debate

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ABSTRACT

Human civilization, in different stages, has witnessed numerous religious and philosophical movements that have proposed human enhancement. When human society was dominated by human labor, they proposed humanistic ways to overcome human problems and surpass human limitations. The introduction of new technologies in human society has led to a change in human thought. Transhumanism as a philosophical movement is the result of techno-dominated human society that advocates for the harmonious combination of man and machine or technology. This paper attempts to clarify about this movement drawing from its historical roots, philosophical bases to modern institutions and thinkers associated with it. Critical observation of the ideas of different thinkers has led to the conclusion that transhumanism opens multiple opportunities to human enhancement. However, the issue of ethics remains prominent. It ultimately leads to the crumbling of traditional norms, values, rules and regulations, and creates the need of redefining human beings, human relations and human identity. However, there is no way out than accepting it. The paper is in qualitative research design based on the library study. It derives data from scholarly publications, books and articles and utilizes the sources from the internet. This research work is beneficial for those who are interested in the future of humanity with advancements in science and technology. Similarly, it opens up the research path for exploring human psychology and human relationship in techno guided modern world.

INTRODUCTION

Human history has witnessed different religious and philosophical movements. All of them have a single motive, which is to improve the human condition and surpass the difficulties that human beings are facing. They differ from each other in the sense of predicting the way of improving the human condition. Hinduism claims that Mokshaya is the final goal of human life but before achieving this stage one has to pass through numerous other stages. The first stage is the Kama, which is involving in the earthly works that sustains human civilization. Second is the stage of Dharma, doing benevolent action. The third stage is Sanyasa, moving away from earthly life. Fourth is the stage of Dhayana, doing penance renouncing all the material touch that ultimately leads to Mokshya or the ultimate freedom. In Buddhism, the names of the stages differ but they resemble those of Hinduism. Buddhists state the stages as Maya that is earthly attachment, Renunciation, Meditation and Nirvana. Christianity calls them as Devotion, Salvation and Stage of Eden, Similarly, Nietzsche calls them as self-actualization and stage of superman.

These all movements have the essence of human betterment not by any outer force but by the inner force or the discovering the potentiality of human beings. That is why they can be called humanistic approaches. However, the massive involvement of science and technology in human life has opened up new potentialities for human betterment. The philosophical movement that discusses the potentiality of human improvement combining the human body with technology is called transhumanism. The guiding premise of transhumanism is that by means

of science and technology, human race can evolve beyond its current physical and mental limitations. By merging man and machine, science will produce humans who have vastly increased intelligence, bodily performance and life span: a near embodiment of god. Man will remain man but transcend himself/herself by realizing new possibilities when combined with technology. Surely, in the merging of man and machine there comes the controversy and issue of ethics.

Scholars are divided into supporters and opponents of the act of merging man and machine. Highlighting the positive aspects of this merging, the supporters show its essentiality. Scholars like Nick Bostron point that this movement is helping for equality by dismantling previous categories making people's access to technology that was previously inaccessible. One day humans will free themselves of all corporal restraints. In contrast, opponents claim that if this merging comes into practice, it will ultimately challenge present human identity and force a change in human definition. Francis Fukoyama is against its implementation. He argues, significance altering of human biology is not only inherently immoral but also threatening social order. Therefore, it should not be permitted. Scholars have presented equally strong arguments for and against this movement. That is why this movement is a debatable one in the ethical sense. Following qualitative research design, this research obtains data from different scholarly publications: books and journals associated with the research problem. This research opens ample opportunities for doing research in multiple aspects of transhumanism and its impact in human relationship, psychology and identity.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Transhumanism debate has affected academia immensely. Different scholars have analyzed the philosophical movement called transhumanism in numerous ways and their critical play up on the multiple aspects of this movement has broadened its scope and value. Bostron (2005) recalls human history showing the essence of human desires and human enhancement. He asserts:

The human desire to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself. We have always sought to expand the boundaries of our existence, be it socially, geographically, or mentally. The human desire to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself. We have always sought to expand the boundaries of our existence, be it socially, geographically, or mentally.

Bostron views the human desire to acquire new capacities not peculiar. Throughout human history, human beings have invested their efforts in transcending social, geographical or mental boundaries. Therefore, the effort of transhumanism to enhance human capacity is acceptable.

Ostberg (2024) has stressed the idea of improving human condition, “Transhumanism, philosophical and scientific movement that advocates the use of current and emerging technologies, such as genetic engineering, cryonics, artificial intelligence (AI), and nanotechnology, to augment human capabilities and improve the human condition”(Transhumanism, para. 1). Ostberg stresses the harmonious combination of man and technology as the prominent feature of transhumanism. Technological advancement and human enhancement should go hand in hand. Similarly, Hopkins (2012) defines the movement in detail highlighting multiple aspects. He points:

Transhumanism is the position that human beings should be permitted to use technology to modify and enhance human cognition and bodily function, expanding abilities and capacities beyond current biological constraints. Unlike some other philosophical positions and social movements (e.g., feminism, liberalism, communism, and libertarianism), transhumanism is not best characterized by a particular dogma, principle, or prediction. Transhumanists vary in their political doctrines, their positions on ethical issues, and their religious outlooks. What distinguishes transhumanism as a movement and ideology is instead a set of shared core values and the conviction that those values can be pursued using technology.

For Hopkins transhumanism demands the permission of combining man and machine for surpassing different constraints that human beings are facing at present. Moreover, it is free of any dogma or principle.

Prisco (2013) discusses the commonality of transhumanists. He indicates, “What all transhumanists have in common is the conviction that using advanced technologies to radically change the human condition is both feasible and desirable”. For Prisco the common ground for all transhumanists is the preference of using advanced technologies to change the human condition.

Drawing in the responsibility of supporting the universe and all species on the earth and showing the essentiality of transhumanism Huxley (1968) marks:

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.

Huxley has pointed out the most important feature of transhumanism is to transcend human beings realizing new potentialities. This transcending is with the combination of new technology. Moore (2012) points, “One critique of transhumanism is that it starts from the standpoint of viewing the human condition as weak, poor, and ‘not very good,’ both physically and morally”. Regarding the present human situation, having just weaknesses is the demerit of transhumanism. In this sense, it can be called a cynical movement.

The survey of the scholarly discussion on transhumanism has revealed that the movement has elicited the response of the numerous scholars and has occupied a major place in academia. Ostbery stresses the harmony between man and machine as envisioned by transhumanism and Hopkin points to the journey of this movement to surpass the constraints faced by present human beings. Similarly, Prisco finds the preference of using advanced technology to change human condition as the primary purpose of transhumanism and Huxley claims the aim of transhumanism as transcending human beings. In contrast, Moore criticizes the movement in its assumption regarding the present human situation as defective.

Most of the scholars have invested their efforts to define it and show its negative or positive effect. Very few scholars have used their criticality to discuss it in a dialectic way to unfold both positive and negative aspects of the movement and its ethical impact. This is the research gap identified and this research aims to fill it. It discusses the movement in multiple layers and basic focus is given to discuss it from an ethical perspective.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research work follows qualitative research design focusing on library study. It accesses data from both primary and secondary sources. Different scholarly books and journals as well as the internet sources associated with the research issue are consulted. Ideas of multiple authors are discussed and critically analyzed to support the claim.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This is the major part of this research work. It contains different aspects of the discussion associated with transhumanism. The first part is the presentation of the historical context, philosophical roots and different modern movements associated with transhumanism. Then there is the presentation of the basic philosophy,

strengths and weaknesses. The pivotal part of the writing is the discussion of the ethical issues that the movement has raised. It unfolds the ideas of multiple thinkers that have articulated debate. This discussion is guided to show how transhumanism as a philosophical debate has led to different possibilities of human enhancement and destruction of the traditional human relationships and systems. Moreover, it points how transhumanism debate is dominated by ethical issue.

Historical Context, Philosophical Roots and Modern Movements Associated with Transhumanism

Transhumanism as a movement that evolved over time encountering multiple philosophical debates is associated with different scholars and does not have a single founder. It has developed through contributions from various thinkers, philosophers, and scientists. However, some key figures are often credited with shaping and formalizing the movement. Among them Julian Huxley and his 1957 essay "Transhumanism" has a high value in the history of transhumanism. His ideas expressed in this essay led to the formation of a philosophical movement that influenced the whole world. In the essay, Huxley describes the concept of humanity transcending its physical and mental limitations using science and technology. He envisions the future of humanity surpassing biological and mental limitations in the harmonious combination of man with machine and technology. Credit for giving transhumanism a modern framework goes to the philosopher Max More. Establishing the Extropy Institute, More created a hub for transhumanism. The institute helped by organizing different interactional programs among the philosophers associated with the transhumanist ideas. Similarly, F.M. Esfandiary is responsible for spreading and popularizing transhumanist ideas in the 1970s and 1980s. Esfandiary promoted the vision of new humans rejecting traditional notions of identity, mortality, and physical limitations. His book entitled *Are You A Transhumanist?* outlined a roadmap for embracing a transhumanist future. His book played a great role in making the previously unaccepted concept of transhumanism acceptable.

Similarly, different religious philosophies that preached the better position of human beings in certain ways and the thinkers who have presented their different views in relation to human capacity and enhancement are the philosophical roots of transhumanism. The religious philosophies are the humanistic approaches as they focus on human efforts for the betterment. The great philosopher Nietzsche (2006) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* has discussed the idea of self-overcoming the limitations in the form of 'Overman' or 'Superman'. Another philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's idea of 'Omega Point' is the preconception of transhumanism. This is the future evolutionary state of supreme consciousness harmoniously combined with technology.

To talk about the root of transhumanist philosophy typically, it bases on positivism and utilitarianism, emphasizing empirical science as a means to improve

the human condition physically and intellectually. It also incorporates elements of existentialism by advocating for individual agency in shaping human destiny. With this movement, an individual will be free to choose his destiny. Prominent transhumanist thinkers, such as Max More and Nick Bostrom, have articulated these ideas in detail. Going one-step ahead Bostrom has proposed frameworks for understanding and guiding humanity's technological evolution.

Modern transhumanist movement took shape in 20th century. For shaping it in formal form, different organizations based on the philosophical roots played a very crucial role. Among others, the Extropy Institute established in 1990 by Max More and Natasha Vita-More has a higher place. It focuses on spreading transhumanist philosophy. Organizing different talk programs, this institute initiated the task of spreading the philosophical thoughts of transhumanism. World Transhumanist Association known as Humanity+ is the organization that advocates for the ethical use of technology to enhance human capacities. Initiated by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce, this organization is responsible for popularizing transhumanism in the present era. Now this philosophical movement has become the prominent issue for discussing different human enhancement activities that aim at promoting human capacity.

Julian Huxley is credited as the intellectual father of transhumanism, but the movement has evolved through different ups and downs. Beginning from the religious philosophies that regard the existing human situation as insufficient, the essentiality of human effort for betterment to the need of combining human and machine for human enhancement are the stages that transhumanism passed through.

Basic Philosophy of Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a word that has wider coverage having similar propositions like that of philosophy philosophical, anthropological, technological, and theoretical positions. Primarily, transhumanists aim to transcend the physical, mental and psychological limitation that humanity is facing at present. Until and unless human beings overcome the limitations that nature is putting to us, it is impossible to lead to higher level of consciousness. Moreover it is not possible to overcome the trapping hindrances and increase individual freedom and secure humanity from different explosive crises. Secondly, Transhumanism is based on liberal ideas of society as a political program. Accordingly, transhumanists strive towards a future society with totally free individuals. There individuals will be permitted to live the life they prefer. Thirdly, Transhumanism is a biological, social, and technological anthropology of the human species that regards the present position of human beings having numerous defects and extremely in need of drastic improvement. That is why the virtual and teleological aim of transhumanism is to be post humanist.

Moreover, human evolution based on technology is

base of this theory. Therefore, it asserts that having harmonious combination with machine and technology man can improve, increase and enhance his physical and cognitive qualities. There is no limit to this theory as it plays on extreme possibilities. Transhumanists claim that natural events such as old age, guilt, suffering and even death can be changed, dominated and overridden. They believe that man can transform his/her morphology, choosing between various options for the propagation of the species. Some of the transhumanists go so far as to talk about the possibility of mind hovering that is leaving aside the human body by transferring all the “information” contained in each individual into a computer. Like computer chips, information of the human mind can be modified, transferred and stored.

Strength and Weaknesses of Transhumanism

As a philosophical movement that has influenced modern academia extremely, transhumanism has certain weaknesses and strengths. They are the parts of this movement. The major strength of the movement is the human enhancement and the act of surpassing human weaknesses. As a weakness, this movement is blamed as failure to address the problems of present but concerned much for past. It also attempts to overcome cognitive aspects such as social skills, memory, concentration and intelligence, and physical aspects such as death. The attempt to overcome death is unnatural.

More advantages can be identified with this philosophical movement. Another section of its positive influence is the harmonious combination of man, machine and technology to enhance human intelligence, senses and learning. In this sense, this philosophical movement seeks to decrease the defects of people and, therefore, the human being can be led to perfection. Expected technological development assures the human body to make it more resistant to disease, thus guaranteeing longevity. This also aims to slow down ageing. In this sense, marking the positive qualities of this movement, its profounder Huxley (1968) asserts, “Already, we can justifiably hold the belief that these lands of possibility exist, and that the present limitations and miserable frustrations of our existence could be in large measure surmounted”. Against the pessimists who never see any future possibilities but just the devastation, Huxley points to the possibility of surpassing human limitations and addressing human frustration by combining man and machine. Asserting the positive possibility of transhumanism in the age flooded by the pessimistic news, Lilly (2013) mentions:

The transhumanists offer a hopeful vision at a time when things could be better, should be better. We face interminable war, food and water shortages, global warming, economic instability, senseless violence, and many of us have little faith that current social institutions can handle these problems.

Lilly stresses the value of transhumanism in the sense of spreading optimism to the people who are faded up with negative news and pessimistic views.

Additional disadvantages can be identified. First and major disadvantage is the possibility of completely losing human identity. Present capitalism is creating a vast gap between rich and poor. This merging of technology with man for enhancement can lead to extreme inequalities between countries and continents, increasing the digital divide and the possibility of social conflicts. Similarly, the conflict related to moral, judicial and ethical laws arises, generating social unrest. Critiquing the dissatisfaction this movement puts to the present condition of human beings Moore (2012) points:

One critique of transhumanism is that it starts from the standpoint of viewing the human condition as weak, poor, and ‘not very good,’ both physically and morally. Aspects of life that involve disease, disability, aging, and involuntary death are seen as undesirable and unnecessary. Moore has the view that dissatisfaction with natural human qualities or traits might lead to certain unthinkable and terrible situations. It is not sure that altering natural qualities leads to a better situation. He objects to the act of altering natural qualities for artificial efficiency.

Ethical Debate on Transhumanism and Its Impact on Human Society

The transhumanist movement has multiple possibilities both positive and negative. Moreover, it is not without controversy. The supporters point to the possibilities of solving the vital physical and mental problems that human beings are facing at present. They stress that a harmonious combination of man and machine or technology will lead to unthinkable human enhancement. Critics argue that such enhancement may create social inequalities, by limiting the access of technology to limited rich people who enjoy extreme benefit and more power.

It is sure that altering human nature might bring numerous unintended consequences, such as the loss of individuality or unforeseen psychological impacts (Sandel, 2007). Sandel is worried about the unpredictable negative consequences that human ambition of achieving the position of god might bring. So he stands against artificial enhancement. Moreover, the concept of altering god has drawn criticism from religious and philosophical perspectives. Some view the pursuit of radical human enhancement as hubristic, suggesting that it undermines the sanctity of human life. Thinker Fukuyama has the view of questioning the destiny of transhumanism. Where will it lead to human civilization? His worry is related to the ethical implications of creating beings with vastly superior capabilities, which could disrupt social and moral norms (Fukuyama, 2002). Diversity is the essential and vital nature of human society. If this natural diversity is replaced by the techno pushed artificial diversity, the result cannot be positive. Fukuyama stands against the priority transhumanism gives to artificial modification.

On the other hand, proponents like Bostron(2014) argue that the responsible development and regulation of enhancement technologies could alleviate suffering and improve quality of life. Bostron emphasizes the

importance of equitable access to these innovations, ensuring that their benefits are distributed broadly across societies. As the technological advancements will be accessible for all people it will not create a gap but will fill the gap that human society is facing at present. Bostron has the strong faith in the equality that technological advancement ultimately creates.

AI technologies promise significant advancements in cognitive enhancement. Brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) are being developed to integrate human brains with artificial systems, enabling direct communication between the mind and machines. Such advancement in technology could enhance memory, learning, and problem-solving abilities. It helps to create augmented intelligence (Goertzel, 2014). Goertzel takes this potentiality of combining artificial intelligence with human activities positively. Enhancement of human memory, learning and problem solving capacity with technological assistance is positive.

Another aspect of transhumanism that is related to ethical debate is the use of nanotechnology for improving human health at the molecular level. Nanobots, for example, could be deployed to repair cells, deliver drugs precisely, or eliminate pathogens. It can be used to alter the natural bodily qualities of human beings. Similarly, cybernetics explores the integration of mechanical and electronic components into the human body. The strong objection of those ethicists is the implantation of machines in the normal body to make it more efficient. This search for efficiency in an artificial way would lead to uncertainty. Kurzweil (2005) emphasizes on the development of advanced prosthetics and exoskeletons exemplifies how technology can restore or even surpass natural human abilities. Use of artificial body parts to replace non functioning organs is acceptable but more than this is strongly objectionable. It leads to an uncertain future.

One of the most questionable but intriguing aspects of transhumanism is the pursuit of digital immortality. This search for immortality defeating natural death invites criticism and a dark future. Researchers are investigating the possibility of uploading human consciousness into digital systems, preserving individuals' thoughts, memories, and personalities beyond their biological lifespans. Such technological advancement based on nanotechnology implanted in the human body altering traditional patterns of natural mental functioning will demand total change in the concept of human beings. Hayles (2017) discusses in detail about such technological enhancement critically showing its dreadful possibility. Hayles warns that while still in its infancy, this field raises profound questions about identity, personhood, and the nature of consciousness.

The thinkers who are associated with the movement of transhumanism are divided. Some of them like Bostron, Goertzel and Kurzweil are in support of this movement; and Sandel, Hayle and Fukuyama object to the domination of artificiality over natural qualities as promoted by this movement. The base of the supporters is the motive of

human enhancement at all costs. If there is the possibility of defeating human weakness that we are experiencing at present, why not to go for that. Our norms, values, rules and regulations are human made and can be changed as per changing situation. The opponents have the common view that aspiring for total perfection might bring terrible consequences. Extreme alteration of natural qualities might lead to an unpredictable dark future. Therefore, they are doubtful about the consequences. Moreover, their objection is based on the ethical ground. What will happen to human identity, human relation, love, affection and emotion? Similarly, loss of traditional norms, values, rules and regulations will lead to nothingness. That is why they prefer improvement of natural qualities not the domination of artificiality eradicating inherited qualities. They are not ready to redefine human beings, human relations and human values for artificial encroachment on the human body.

CONCLUSION

Our observation of the different aspects of transhumanism leads us to the conclusion that technological advancement in harmony with human beings invites so many possibilities for human enhancement in the future. It unfolds the possibility of correcting the defects in human physiology and psychology in combination with advanced technology. Altering different natural traits is unpredictable and frightening. Scholars are divided into two groups: supporters and opponents of transhumanism. Those supporters show its essentiality whereas the opponents raise different ethical issues and oppose it. Though the desire for digital immortality is unacceptable, there is no option of accepting it and moving ahead. It ultimately leads to the redefinition of what it means to be human beings. It breaks traditionally established boundaries between biology and technology and dismisses the questions about identity, morality, and the essence of human existence and many more. Although the journey toward a transhumanist future is suspected with ethical dilemmas and uncertainties, it also holds immense potentiality of human enhancement and expands the horizons of human possibilities. Present world is the land of possibilities; the possibility of change should not be hindered in the name of identity, emotion and ethics. What is wise is to work for reducing the negative consequences that might come with this movement and utilizing positive possibilities.

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